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Deity and Creation in the *Christian Doctrine*

Kent R. Lehnhof

In a recent essay Joseph Wittreich has characterized *Paradise Lost* as an “arena for conflict, a battleground for warring values” wherein contrary theologies struggle for supremacy (244). In many ways, Wittreich’s description of the epic aptly applies to the author. There has never been a time when critics have not argued about Milton’s alleged orthodoxy or heterodoxy. For over three hundred years, readers have endeavored to locate Milton either inside or outside of orthodox Anglicanism. In the last decade, William B. Hunter has stoked this critical controversy, attacking the provenance of the *Christian Doctrine* in order to situate Milton “closer to the great traditions of Christianity, no longer associated with a merely eccentric fringe” (166). Opposing Hunter’s idea of an orthodox Milton, Janel Mueller points out that in Milton’s prose, the word “heresy” often has positive rather than pejorative connotations. She claims that Milton frequently employs the word “in its neutral pagan and Jewish senses of a freely chosen, energetically arrived-at doctrine that in turn constitutes a school, whether of philosophy or religion” (24).

Mueller maintains that at times Milton uses the term in such a way as to make “heresy” synonymous with “true religion” (26). Drawing upon Mueller’s work, Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich have suggested that Milton believes heresy to be bound up with the pursuit of truth. They have maintained that for Milton

“heresy” implies a rational process that ultimately produces conviction and instigates future inquiry. The process of heresy may provoke the formation of a new school of thought, or the deviation from an existing one, whether in religion or philosophy. Hence heresy evolves into orthodoxy, from which new heresies eventually depart. (2)

According to Dobranski and Rumrich, Milton explicitly recognizes that “heresy and orthodoxy beget and define one another” and that he “accept[s] this process as inevitable and even desirable” (2).

Building upon the recent scholarship of Mueller, Dobranski, and Rumrich, this essay

continues to explore the interplay of orthodoxy and heresy in Milton's individual theology, attending particularly to Milton's understanding of the Godhead. In order to establish the orthodox doctrine that "begets" and "defines" Milton's own thought, I initiate this examination by turning to the Nicene Creed and the writings of Saint Augustine.

In the year 325 in Nicaea of Bithynia, Constantine convened the first-ever ecumenical council to address the division created within the Church by an increasingly vociferous faction that challenged the divinity of the Son of God. This faction, led by Arius, focused on the fact that the Son, unlike the Father, was begotten. According to Arius, the Son's begotten status has substantial effects: because the Son is begotten, the Son's substance must differ from that of the unbegotten Father. As Arius asserts in *Thalia*: "The Father is alien to the Son in substance The substances of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit are different and have no share in each other" (qtd. in Kelly 236). Arius explains that this difference in substance necessarily entails a difference in essence. And a difference in essence, in turn, indicates a difference in divinity. Since the Son does not share in the Father's divine substance, the Son cannot share in the Father's divine status—the Son cannot be "true God." In this way, Arius's denigration of the Son is implicitly predicated upon the assumption that deity derives from substance. The Father is the one true God by virtue of his divine substance; the Son is not the one true God because he lacks this divine substance. Because the Son does not possess the Father's substance, the Son cannot be believed to possess the Father's divinity. It seems that for Arius deity depends upon and derives from the substance of which a being is composed.

The creed that the Nicene Council authored in opposition to Arius's outlook appears to share this conceptualization. At first, the Council attempted to assert the Son's divinity by exclaiming that he is "from God" or "indivisibly God." As J. N. D. Kelly reports, however,

whatever turns of phrase were proposed—that the Son was "from God," that He was "the true Power and Image of the Father," that He was "indivisibly in God," etc.—the Arians

managed somehow to twist them round so as to chime in with their own notions. In the end, says St. Athanasius, there was nothing for it but to interpolate the precise, utterly unambiguous, but non-scriptural, clauses FROM THE SUBSTANCE OF THE FATHER and OF ONE SUBSTANCE WITH THE FATHER. (213)

Consequently, the portion of the creed concerning the Son's divinity was finalized in the following form:

We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father. (qtd. in Kelly 215)

To exclude Arianism, the Council focused on the Son's substance. Declaring the Son's *substance* to be identical to the Father's, the Council considered itself to be simultaneously declaring the Son's *divinity* to be identical to the Father's. In short, the Council's counter-claim regarding the Son's status as God reduces itself to an affirmation of the Son's substantial similarity to God. As Kelly claims: "The full weight of the orthodox reply to Arianism was concentrated" in the phrase "of one substance with the Father." This phrase

completely traversed the Arian position by asserting the full deity of the Son. The Son, it implied, shared the very being or essence of the Father. He was therefore fully divine: whatever belonged to or characterized the Godhead belonged to and characterized Him. (238)

As Kelly concludes, the Nicene Creed "affirmed the full divinity of the Son in language which implied, if it did not explicitly assert, the doctrine of identity of substance between Him and the Father" (243). Equating similarity of substance with similarity of divinity, the Nicene Council appears to assent to Arius's assumption that deity depends upon substantial composition.

In Augustine's orthodox examination of the godhead the substance-driven definition of deity

underlying the Nicene Creed seems to be even more explicit. In *De Trinitate* Augustine straightforwardly declares that "God is without doubt a substance" and argues that this substance is utterly unlike the substance of other existents or objects (5.2.3). Adopting a substantial idea of deity, Augustine explains that all entities composed of divine substance—which Augustine tellingly labels "the substance of the Godhead" (1.8.15)—are, of necessity, gods. Because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost possess the same substance, they must all be recognized as gods. As Augustine instructs:

The power of the same substance in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is so great that everything which is said of the individual person in reference to Himself may also be said of them together. . . . For as the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and no one doubts that these words are spoken according to the substance. (5.8.9)

In the same way that the Nicene Creed implicitly defines deity in terms of substantial composition, Augustine argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are God "according to the substance." Augustine reiterates this idea of divinity when claiming that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are utterly equal: "What is said about each one in this Trinity is likewise said about all of them, on account of the inseparable activity of the one and the same substance" (1.12.25). Equality in divinity derives from equality in substance. Augustine, like Arius and the Nicene Fathers before him, understands deity to be a consequence of essential composition. It is this understanding that David Cunningham signifies when claiming that early patristic thought about the Trinity bases itself in a "metaphysics of substance" (25).

This substantial understanding of divinity also informs Augustine's own disagreement with Arius. Augustine recognizes that Arianism begins with the belief that the Son's begottenness entails a difference in substance from the unbegotten Father. Significantly, Augustine does not disagree that a difference in substance between Father and Son would produce a difference in divinity. He readily acknowledges that "the Son is in no res-

pect equal to the Father, if He is found to be unequal in anything pertaining to the substance" (6.4.6). Augustine, however, contends that the terms "begotten" and "Son" have no relation to substance. These terms only outline relationships:

The Father is only called the Father because He has a Son, the Son must, therefore, be only called the Son because He has a Father These terms are not said according to the substance Consequently, although to be the Father and to be the Son are two different things, still there is no difference in their substance, because the names, Father and Son, do not refer to the substance but to the relation. (5.5.6)

In other words, "although begotten is different from unbegotten, still it does not indicate a difference in substance" (5.7.8).

Having established to his satisfaction that the scriptures do not describe a difference in substance between the Father and the Son, Augustine uses a substance-based notion of deity to argue the exact opposite position. Citing Phillipians 2.6 ("He thought it not robbery to be equal to God"), Augustine asserts that the Son's stated equality with the Father necessarily indicates a similarity of substance: "The Apostle calls [the Son] equal. Therefore, the Son is equal to the Father in everything, and is of one and the same substance" (6.4.6). Speaking of the Son, Augustine affirms: "He is of the one and the same substance with the Father, and consequently He is not only God but also the true God" (1.6.9). Like the framers of the Nicene Creed, Augustine suggests that deity derives from substance. One is "not only God but also the true God" when one possesses "the substance of Godhead."

The substantial understanding of divinity that seems to shape the orthodox positions of Nicaea and of Augustine, however, fails to function in Milton's theological framework. As a materialist monist, Milton maintains that there is only one substance in the universe: the "substantia" of the Father. It is out of this single substance that all things are created. According to Milton: "God produced all things not out of nothing but out of himself" (6.310).¹ This posture of materialist monism precludes Milton from participating in

the Nicene and Augustinian formulations of divinity. As Michael Bauman observes: "Within the orthodox trinitarian scheme ... the divine *ousia* is unequivocally the possession of Godhead only, and is in no way common to beings not themselves absolutely divine." Within Milton's theological framework, however, "those who possess [the Father's] 'substantia' are not necessarily God, because in Milton's universe *all created things whatsoever*, from archangels down to aardvarks and anthracite coal, share the same 'substantia.'" Bauman is completely correct when he concludes that in a schema where all things are created out of the substance of the Father, simply sharing God's substance does not entail any type of divine metaphysical status. For Milton, substantial similarity to God cannot serve as "the infallible hallmark of true divinity" (86–87).

Since divinity cannot be established by reference to a divine composition, Milton's materialist monism requires that deity be defined otherwise. For Milton, this alternative definition seems to be grounded in acts of creation. A god is not a god because of his substantial composition but because of his ability to create. In other words, divinity for Milton derives from creation.

This understanding of deity begins to take shape in the second chapter of the *Christian Doctrine*, where Milton takes up the monumental subject "Of God." In the first sentence of the chapter, Milton gestures toward atheism, acknowledging: "That there is a God, many deny" (6.130). Immediately assailing this opinion, Milton points to the created universe:

It is indisputable that all the things which exist in the world, created in perfection of beauty and order for some definite purpose, and that a good one, provide proof that a supreme creative being existed before the world, and had a definite purpose of his own in all created things. (6.130)

According to Milton, the most powerful witness of the existence of God is the existence of "created things." Yet Milton's response suggests that creation's relation to God is not simply evidentiary. Replacing the initial term "God" with the subsequent term "supreme creative being," the passage implies that creative acts do not merely

affirm God but might actually constitute God. In other words, creation not only points to God but in some sense produces Him.

The idea that God is to some degree created by his status vis-à-vis creation is informed by the conviction that no creature can ever acquit itself of the obligation it owes to its creator. The creature is forever indebted to the creator for bestowing upon it the gift of life or being. As a result of this eternal debt, every act of creation produces relationships of dominance and subordination: a creator will always rule over his or her creations. Simply put, authorship endows authority: what one makes, one masters. This genesis-driven hierarchy, of course, speaks to God's sovereignty. As Milton affirms: "God is the first, absolute and sole cause of all things" (6.307). Because God has created everything, he is authorized to rule everything. His sovereignty is a direct result of his generative ability.

And the exclusive nature of his sovereignty is a direct result of the exclusive part he plays in creation. Citing scripture at the start of the chapter entitled "Of the Creation," Milton strings together several biblical passages, all of which give God the Father exclusive credit for the creation. As Milton arranges and excerpts them, they read:

Job ix. 8: *who alone spreads out the heavens*; Isa. xlv. 24: *I, Jehovah, make all things, I alone spread out the heavens, and I stretch forth the earth by myself*, and xlv. 6, 7: *that from the sun's rising and from its setting the nations may know that there is none beside me, that I am Jehovah, and there is none else: that I form the light and create the darkness.* (6.300)

Milton concludes from these scriptures that since God is alone in creation, he must—of necessity—be alone in authority: "If such things as common sense and accepted idiom exist at all, then these words preclude the possibility not only of there being any other God, but also of there being any person, of any kind whatever, equal to him" (6.300). According to Milton, God's singular status as god is incontrovertibly established by his singular status as creator.

The link between God's authorship and his ensuing authority is structurally registered in the outlay of the chapters of the *Christian Doctrine*. It is not insignificant that the chapter detailing "Of

God's Providence, or His Universal Government of Things" immediately follows the chapter treating "Of the Creation." In Milton's text, as in Milton's theology, God's universal creation precedes and licenses God's universal government. The thesis statement of the chapter on universal government further reinforces the connection between sovereignty and creation, defining God's general government of the universe as "that by which GOD THE FATHER VIEWS AND PRESERVES ALL CREATED THINGS" (6.326). The important qualification of this exclamation (not "all things" but rather "all *created* things") hints at the way in which authority is a function of authorship in Milton's ideological framework.²

Because authority arises from authorship, it is crucial that Milton's God is the creator of all things, but it is equally important that he is not himself a creature. In order to be absolutely supreme, God must be free of the primary debt all creatures owe their creator: he must be self-begotten. Were he not, he would necessarily be subordinate to his creator, and this subordinate status would compromise his utter authority. As Milton writes: "All this is so obvious in itself that it really needs no explanation. It is quite clear . . . that a being who is not self-existent cannot be a God" (6.218). God's sovereignty, then, also arises from the fact that his self-existent status frees him from the claims of a superior creator. As the only uncreated existent in the universe, God is the only entity without a superior, thus, the only supreme being.

In short, God's self-existent status releases him from fealty to a superior being and his all-creating identity affords him the obedience of all that exists. These two criteria—ontological independence and exclusive authorship—form the basis of Milton's notion of God. They are the central attributes that Milton points to when defining supernatural supremacy: "For a supreme God is self-existent, but a God who is not self-existent, who did not beget but was begotten, is not a first cause but an effect, and is therefore not a supreme God" (6.263–64). The supreme being, according to Milton, is supreme by virtue of his status as a non-begotten begetter. And this supremacy translates into absolute dominion: the creator of all things living is allowed to rule all living things.

The rigor with which Milton adheres to this principle of authorship/authority is illustrated by his discussion in the *Christian Doctrine* of the precise nature of the Son's divinity. Given the significance Milton places on processes of creation, it is not at all surprising that he begins the chapter "Of the Son of God" by examining the Son's status vis-à-vis generation. Addressing the idea that the Son is, like the Father, eternally present and uncreated, Milton reports: "Not a scrap of real evidence for the eternal generation of the Son can be found in the whole of scripture" (6.206). To the contrary: "It is as plain as it could possibly be that God voluntarily created or generated or produced the Son before all things" (6.211). Once it is established that the Son is begotten or made, Milton's theological assessment of the Son's divinity is determined. In keeping with the creator/creature relationship outlined above, Milton asserts that the Son who owes his existence to the Father must for this very reason owe eternal obeisance to the Father. Because the Son is forever indebted to the Father, he is and will always be subordinate to the Father. The Son's inability to claim ontological independence prevents the Son from occupying the position of supreme God because, as Milton declares: "A God cannot be begotten at all" (6.211). Citing the passage in Revelations 3.14 that identifies Christ as "the beginning of God's creation," Milton deduces: "That can only mean that he was the first of the things which God created. How, then, can he be God himself?" (6.303).

As a result of the Son's status as a begotten being, Milton refuses to acknowledge the Son as a God:

Since therefore the Son derives his essence from the Father, the Son undoubtedly comes after the Father not only in rank but also in essence.... The name "Son," upon which my opponents chiefly build their theory of his supreme divinity, is in fact itself the best refutation of their theory. For a supreme God is self-existent, but a God who is not self-existent, who did not beget but was begotten, is not a first cause but an effect, and is therefore not a supreme God. (6.263–64)

Because the Son is not a supreme God, Milton denies him the attributes associated with divinity, such as omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence—although Milton acknowledges that the Father at times endows the Son with these divine attributes. Marshaling scriptural evidence in favor of this finding, Milton asserts:

We are taught about the Son's divine nature as something distinct from and clearly inferior to the Father's nature. For to be with God, and to be from God; to be God, and to be in the bosom of God the Father; to be God, and to be from God; to be the one, invisible God, and to be the only begotten and visible, are quite different things—so different that they cannot apply to one and the same essence. The fact that he derived his glory, even in his divine nature, before the foundations of the world were laid, not from himself but from the Father, who gave it because he loved him, makes it obvious that he is inferior to the Father. (6.273)

In short, Milton's investigation into the divine nature of the Son of God is driven by the fact that the Son cannot claim to be self-begotten. As Milton relentlessly applies the idea that authority arises from authorship, his belief that the Son is a begotten being eventuates in an espousal of an heretical anti-Trinitarianism.³

John Rumrich reminds us of the risks involved in advocating this type of anti-Trinitarian ideology, observing that "in England at least eight antitrinitarian heretics were burned at the stake from 1548 to 1612" (86). One of the last of these martyrs was Bartholomew Legate, a young man whom King James personally interrogated. According to one historical account, James was so angered by Legate's doctrinal opinions that he flew into a rage, lashed out at the boy with his foot, and commanded that Legate be removed from the room. Although the burnings were discontinued after Legate's demise, the cessation was not a sign of increased tolerance: King James simply preferred, in the words of Thomas Fuller, that "Heretics hereafter . . . should silently and privately waste themselves away in Prison rather than to grace them and amuze others with the solemnity of a public Execution" (qtd. In

Rumrich 87). Christopher Hill relates that the Westminster Assembly of Divines did not share James's anti-execution position. In 1648 they recommended that the anti-Trinitarian John Bidle be put to death. Although Bidle avoided immediate execution, he was imprisoned, banished, and re-imprisoned, eventually dying in his prison cell (175). Rumrich points to the persistence of this anti-Trinitarian persecution by noting that William Whitson, Newton's successor at Cambridge, was removed from his chair when his ideas of the Son's inferiority were made known (87). Christopher Hill confirms the continuance of this religious tyranny, observing that "a man was hanged for denying the Trinity as late as 1699" (176). These instances would seem to endorse Rumrich's conclusion that professions of the Son's inferior status "provoked authorities across seventeenth-century Europe as no other heresy could" (87).

Milton's theological treatise exhibits an awareness of the fact that its approach to the Son is unorthodox and, as a result, dangerously provocative. In the "Epistle" that introduces the text, Milton expresses the hope "that all my readers will be sympathetic, and will avoid prejudice and malice, even though they see at once that many of the views I have published are at odds with certain conventional opinions" (6.121). Admitting that these views might be considered heretical, Milton even goes so far as to embrace the label of heretic: "If this is heresy, I confess, as does Paul in Acts xxiv.14, that *following the way which is called heresy I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things that are written in the law and the prophets*" (6.124). It becomes clear as we approach the chapter on the Son that Milton's understanding of the Trinity makes up the main of this acknowledged unorthodoxy. Although no other chapter in the *Christian Doctrine* bears a preface, Milton precedes the chapter "Of the Son of God" with a preamble that baldly sets out to defuse the anger he suspects the chapter will incite. Forewarning the reader that he is now going to talk about the Son of God, Milton exclaims:

I do not see how anyone who calls himself a Protestant or a member of the Reformed Church, and who acknowledges the same rule of faith as myself, could be offended with me

for this, especially as I am not trying to browbeat anyone, but am merely pointing out what I consider the more credible doctrine. This one thing I beg of my reader: that he will weigh each statement and evaluate it with a mind innocent of prejudice and eager only for the truth. (6.203–04)

Expressing concern that the anti-Trinitarian treatise is not likely to encounter either clemency or open-mindedness, Milton's petition for these particular readerly qualities indicates the author's awareness of his heretical stance regarding the Son. The prefatory project of placating an orthodox audience concludes with the conciliatory gesture of seeking God's assistance: "Now, relying on God's help, let us come to grips with the subject itself" (6.204).

The chapter that follows is one of the most strenuously argued sections of the entire treatise, occupying over fifty pages of the original manuscript and marshaling almost six hundred scriptural texts.⁴ Yet the extensive argument was insufficient. One of Milton's anonymous biographers (commonly believed to be his good friend Cyriack Skinner) reports that the publication of Milton's theological tracts was prevented by the presence of "some speculative points, differing perhaps from that commonly receiv'd" (12). The "Epistle" to the treatise, the preface to "On the Son of God," and the work of both Rumrich and Hill suggest that these "speculative points" impeding publication were none other than the unorthodox tenets of the text's anti-Trinitarianism. Even though the *Christian Doctrine* was composed to convey the fullness of the gospel to "All the Churches of Christ and to All in any part of the world who professes the Christian Faith," Milton was forced to conceal—upon pain of imprisonment or possibly execution—his "dearest and best possession" because his understanding of authorship and authority eventuates in an idea of the Trinity intolerable to the Anglican orthodoxy (6.117, 121). Bearing in mind the foundation for Milton's views on the Godhead, we recognize in Milton's costly refusal to alter his opinion of the Son a total commitment to the concept that acts of creation determine and define supreme divinity.

Yet the same logic that leads Milton to exclude

the Son from equality with the Father also impels him to exalt the Son in relation to other existents. Although the Son's status as creature disbars him from being a supreme god, Milton insists that the Son is superior to the rest of God's works. As in the case of the Son's inferiority to the Father, the Son's superiority to the rest of creation grows out of the specifics of the Son's status vis-à-vis creation. Subtle distinctions between his genesis and that of the Father's other creatures signal great differences in authority. First, the Son can claim absolute priority over all other existents: "When the Son is said to be *the first born of every creature* and, Rev. iii. 14, *the beginning of God's creation*, it is as plain as it could possibly be that God voluntarily created or generated or produced the Son before all things" (6.211). The Son precedes all of God's other creatures, and this priority places the Son in a position of privilege. Second, the Son can claim a closer connection to the Father than can other creatures, for he was "begotten" while other creatures were simply "created." As Milton explains: "To Adam, formed out of the dust, God was creator rather than Father; but he was in a real sense Father of the Son, whom he made of his own substance" (6.209). Because begetting entails greater involvement and investment on the part of the Creator, the Son's unique mode of creation affords him authority over those existents that do not enjoy such an proximity to their universal Father.

The most important distinction between the Son and all other existents, however, is the fact that the Son assisted in the creation of all other existents. As the Father's agent in the formation of the universe, the Son is the secondary creator of the universe. And, given the intersection of authorship and authority, this secondary position is sufficient to install the Son in a position of relative sovereignty. Although primarily indebted to the Father for the gift of life, every existent also indirectly owes its life to the Son. The reverence rendered to the Son by all created things, then, is secured by his role in their creation. Set apart by his identity as assistant in universal creation and unique in his status as the only begotten, the Son is sovereign among all created things. The fact that the Son's sovereignty derives from his special relation to acts of creation should by now come as no surprise. The

Son's universal pre-eminence illustrates the way in which Milton carefully considers the act of creation when calculating universal hierarchies and structures of authority. Small distinctions in authorship have eternal consequences in authority.

Within this theological framework, however, the Son's empowering participation in creation is not entirely unproblematic. Because Milton is so meticulous in his understanding of authorship as the source of authority, he is forced to police the processes of creation and propagation. If the Father's status as supreme God springs from his role in creation, it is crucial that the Father alone occupy that role. The Father must be sole creator if he is to be sole sovereign. Consequently, Milton must make careful distinctions in order to ensure that all creation is attributed to the Father. The task is somewhat tricky, for several scriptural passages appear to declare that the world was created by the Son. Accordingly, Milton expends a great deal of effort reconstructing these passages in such a way as to diminish the Son's significance in the genesis of the universe. Milton explicitly owns up to this endeavor when he claims that "I will now demonstrate that when these things are ascribed to the Son, it is done in such a way as to make it easily intelligible that they should all be attributed primarily and properly to the Father alone" (6.233).

In order to decrease the Son's involvement in creation, Milton strenuously emphasizes subtle variations in prepositional phraseology:

Creation ... is always qualified as being through Christ; not by him, but by the Father. (6.267)

"To be *by* the Father" and "to be *through* the Son" are phrases which do not signify the same kind of efficient cause. (6.301)

He *from whom all things are* is clearly distinguished from him *through whom all things are*. (6.216)

The Father is not only he *by* whom, but also he *from* whom, *in* whom, *through* whom, and *on account of* whom all things are But the Son is only he *through* whom all things are, and is therefore the less principal cause. (6.302)

Milton's persistent italicizing testifies to the weight he wants these prepositions to carry. But the extensive addition of emphasis perhaps undermines Milton's very argument, suggesting Milton's need to produce through textual alteration the prepositional differences that he purports to be readily perceptible to any reader. In any case, the hard and fast distinctions that Milton seeks to establish by way of prepositional structure prove troublesome in other ways as well. In spite of Milton's claim that creation is always qualified in such a way as to differentiate the Father from the Son, scriptural texts do not, in fact, consistently employ different prepositions when describing the creative behavior of the Father and the Son. In these instances of overlapping diction, Milton tries to salvage his theological position by arguing that the single shared preposition bears two distinctly different meanings. He claims that the preposition in question signals a relationship of "primary" causation in some contexts, while in others it only indicates "instrumental" or "less principal" causation. To determine which of these two different meanings applies in any given passage, Milton indicates that we need ask but one question: who is doing the creating? If the sentence addresses acts performed by the Father, then Milton insists that the word must indicate primary causation. If the sentence describes the deeds of anyone other than the Father, then the word must indicate secondary causation. The identity of the creating subject is the only criterion that should be considered: "The preposition *through*, when referring to the Father, indicates the prime cause (as in John vi. 57: *I live through the Father*), and when referring to the Son indicates the secondary and instrumental cause" (6.217).

In short, Milton employs a hermeneutics based on backward reading. Instead of interpreting the text in order to arrive at an eventual conclusion, Milton decides upon the appropriate meaning beforehand and then interprets the text in such a way as to confirm this pre-fabricated conclusion. Having ascertained that the only acceptable meaning is one that makes God the Father the primary cause and reduces everyone else to the role of secondary assistant, Milton's singular concern in any particular passage of scripture is to choose the meaning of "through" that will pro-

duce this state of affairs.

Milton is certainly not alone in this apparently arbitrary interpretive stance.⁵ Indeed, one might question whether biblical interpretation ever proceeds in any direction other than backwards. Nevertheless, the backwards-reading interpretive stance that Milton openly adopts in issues of creation constitutes an awkward deviation from the deductive hermeneutic strategy that he elsewhere professes to be sole source of his idiosyncratic doctrine. As he declares on the title page, Milton believes himself to be extracting theology from scripture rather than imposing theology onto scripture: "The Englishman John Milton's Two Books of Investigations into Christian Doctrine Drawn from the Sacred Scriptures Alone" (6.125). Throughout the text Milton styles himself the objective exegete, reading sacred texts with utter disinterest and refusing to allow his own desires to impinge upon his interpretation.

In fact, Milton's attack on orthodox Trinitarians centers in the accusation that they interpret the Bible in order to establish their doctrine rather than allow the Bible to instruct them. In support of this accusation, Milton points to the Trinitarian claim that the word "God" indicates at times the Father individually and at other times the triune godhead collectively. Of the attempt to distinguish between these allegedly discrete meanings of the single word "God," Milton writes:

This distinction is, for various reasons, absurd. Moreover, it is invented solely for the purpose of supporting their theory, though in fact it does not support it but is supported by it, so that if you invalidate the theory, which you can do merely by denying it, the worthless distinction vanishes at the same time. Indeed, the distinction is not merely worthless but no distinction at all. (6.224)

Milton's dismissal of orthodox doctrine due to the fact that it requires the same word to stand for two different concepts seems eerily applicable to his own deistic explications. Divining two distinct modes of creation from the single word "through"—a task Milton undertakes in this very same chapter—Milton appears to be just as culpable as the Trinitarians of fabricating dubious distinctions in support of theory.

Milton also takes issue with the way Trinitarians endeavor to establish their position by stressing the significance of the articles that either do or do not precede the scriptural occurrences of the titles of God. Once again, Milton's rebuke appears entirely pertinent to his own position and the importance it affords prepositions:

Surely, where the very fundamentals of our faith are at stake, we should not place our confidence in something which has to be forced or wrenched, so to speak, from passages dealing with a quite unrelated topic, in which there are sometimes variant readings, and where the meaning is questionable. Nor should we believe in something which has to be lured out from among articles and particles by some sort of verbal bird-catcher, or which has to be dug out from a mass of ambiguities and obscurities like the answers of an oracle. (6.245–46)

The warning seems perfectly suited to Milton's own theology. Insisting on the difference between "by" and "through"—as well as the difference between "through" and "through"—Milton could certainly be convicted of propounding a doctrine that has to be "lured out" from the smallest parts of speech.

Milton's willingness to implement the interpretive stance he elsewhere excoriates stems from his need to restrict creation to the Father. This motive is clearly manifest in the moment when Milton explains the difference between "by" and "through":

"To be *by* the Father" and "to be *through* the Son" are phrases which do not signify the same kind of efficient cause. If they are not of the same kind, then there can be no question of a joint cause, and if there is no joint cause then "the Father *by* whom all things are" will unquestionably be a more important cause than "the Son *through* whom all things are." (6.301–302)

According to Milton, the two words must signify different degrees of causation lest the Son be considered a co-creator ("joint cause") with the Father. Sharing the Father's creation is in turn unacceptable, for this would compromise the

Father's status as the "more important cause" and, consequently, compromise his status as the universal sovereign.

The authority/authorship imperative that molds the discussion of "by" and "through" similarly shapes the differentiation of "through" and "through." Milton explains that the problematic preposition must at times mean something other than principal causation because it otherwise would imperil the Father's primacy in creation. Citing several scriptures that acclaim creation "through" the Son, Milton declares that the preposition "does not denote the principal cause in these passages, because if it did the Father himself, by whom all things are, would not be the principal" (6.301). And, according to Milton's understanding of universal power structures, a Father who is not principal would not be supreme, and therefore would not be God. Milton's arduously argued heresies regarding the Son of God, then, can be seen to come primarily from his notion that divinity and domination derive from creation.

The chapter in the *Christian Doctrine* that addresses the third member of the orthodox Trinity, the Holy Ghost, also takes shape according to Milton's ideas of authorship and authority. Predictably, Milton initiates his investigation by examining the Holy Ghost's beginnings. Milton notes that the scriptures clearly declare that the Son is begotten of the Father, but points out that sacred texts are strangely silent about the origins of the Holy Ghost: "The Bible . . . says nothing about what the Holy Spirit is like, how it exists, or where it comes from" (6.281). Because an existent is situated in Milton's schema according to its means of existence, the enigmatic genesis of the Holy Ghost produces a certain amount of uncertainty: "The spirit, then, is not said to be generated or created, and it cannot be decided, from biblical evidence, how else it exists. So we must leave the point open, since the sacred writers are so non-committal about it" (6.281–82).

Milton has difficulty inhabiting this open-endedness in relation to the Holy Ghost, however, for the role that the Holy Ghost seems to play in creation potentially compromises the Father's omnific identity. As was the case with the Son, creative acts attributed to the Holy Ghost endanger the Father's sovereignty and

must therefore be contained. In order to eradicate the risk the Holy Spirit represents as a rival or co-creator, Milton insists that passages crediting the Holy Ghost with creation really refer not to the Holy Ghost but to the Father. When Genesis explains that the world emerges after "the spirit of God brooded" upon the waters, for example, Milton argues that we are intended to identify "the spirit of God" not with a third member of the godhead but rather with "the power and virtue of the Father" (6.282). Similarly, when Matthew claims that the child Mary conceives "is of the holy spirit," we are to supposed to understand that "under the gospel the term 'spirit of God' or 'holy spirit' sometimes means the Father himself" (6.283). In order to confirm the Father in his authoritative identity as sole creator, Milton must at times empty out the idea of the Holy Ghost, erasing the entity and turning the title into a simple epithet straightforwardly signifying "the Father."

Milton cannot completely overlook the existent known as the Holy Ghost, however, and eventually admits that "ultimately, 'spirit' can mean the actual person of the Holy Spirit, or its symbol" (6.285). As a result of the Holy Ghost's potential as a counter-creator or alter-author, Milton is quick to assert its inferiority in those rare instances when he does allow the Holy Ghost an individual identity. But Milton finds it somewhat difficult to logically establish this inferiority, for the Holy Ghost—as Milton has earlier explained—is not explicitly identified as a creature of God. Because it is not certain that the Holy Ghost owes its existence to the Father, Milton cannot conclude that the Holy Ghost thereby owes to the Father the submissiveness of a son/creature. Perplexed by his inability to insert the Holy Ghost into a structure of authorship and authority, Milton must momentarily abandon his model of universal government and insist upon an inferiority that he cannot explain:

As the above passages comprise just about all we are told in express terms about the Holy Spirit, they also represent all we can or ought to know on the subject. What they amount to is this: the Holy Spirit, unlike the Son, is nowhere said to have submitted himself to any mediatorial function. He is nowhere said to be

under an obligation, as a son is, to pay obedience to the Father. Nevertheless he is obviously inferior to both the Father and the Son, inasmuch as he is represented as being and is said to be subservient and obedient in all things. (6.288)

Milton has established the Son's submission to the Father by showing him to be a creature of the Father, but he cannot do the same for the Holy Ghost. Unable to assert the Holy Ghost's status as a creature of God, Milton has no logical grounds upon which to base the Holy Ghost's submission. The "nevertheless" of this passage marks the momentary lapse of logic: with the word Milton recognizes that his assertion of the Holy Ghost's submission does not follow from the preceding facts but resolves to make the unwarranted assertion "nevertheless." After leaping over this aporia in his argument, Milton tries to justify his estimation of the Holy Ghost's subordination by any means available. The Holy Ghost must be subordinate to the Father, Milton eventually insists, because it always acts as if it were subordinate: "He is obviously inferior to both the Father and the Son, inasmuch as he is represented as being and is said to be subservient and obedient in all things."

Grounded in the Holy Spirit's apparently inviolable allegiance to the Father, Milton is able to resume his rigorous understanding of authority as derivative of authorship. If God's sovereignty stems from creation and if the Holy Ghost recognizes God as sovereign, then the Holy Ghost must be a creature of God. Because Milton construes authority exclusively in terms of authorship, the fact that the Father wields authority over the Holy Ghost constitutes compelling proof that the Father authored the Holy Ghost. Although Milton has opened the chapter on the Holy Ghost with the emphatic claim that it is impossible to ascertain the Holy Ghost's origins, he concludes the chapter by boldly contradicting his own claim. He not only asserts that the Father created the Holy Ghost but also speculates as to the chronology of this creation:

The Holy Spirit, since he is a minister of God, and therefore a creature, was created, that is, produced, from the substance of God ...

maybe before the foundations of the world were laid, but after the Son, to whom he is far inferior, was made. (6.298)

This startling reversal regarding the generation of the Holy Spirit arises from Milton's certainty that authority corresponds with authorship. Since the Holy Ghost is a minister of God, it must therefore be a creature. And since the Holy Ghost is inferior to the Son, it must therefore have been created after the Son.

In "Of the Holy Spirit," then, Milton reverses the rhetorical direction of "Of the Son of God." In the chapter on the Son, Milton establishes that the Son is created by the Father and uses this datum to prove that the Son is therefore inferior to the Father. In the chapter on the Holy Ghost, Milton establishes that the Holy Ghost is inferior to the Father and uses this datum to prove that the Holy Ghost is therefore a creature of the Father. In complementary ways, both chapters witness the way in which Milton's monistic conception of universal government is founded upon notions of authorship. For Milton, structures of domination and subordination are entirely determined (and determinable) by acts of creation. It is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that creation is at the epicenter of Milton's theology.

Once we recognize the role that creation plays in Milton's theology, we are better able to understand the role that creation plays in Milton's poetry. In spite of the fact that we have not fully grasped the theological imperatives that produce this state of affairs, Miltonists have nevertheless noticed that Milton's poetry is intensely interested in the processes of life-giving. Some fifty years ago Kester Svendsen observed that

Fecundity and creativity ... form a dominant motif in *Paradise Lost* in the opposition of Christ and Satan. The emergence of life from the dust of the earth, the origin of Adam and Eve, the dynamic opulence of the garden, indeed, the whole narrative, symbolize the struggle between positive and negative creativity. (187-88)

Critics have been quick to expound upon Svendsen's observation, commenting at length on the centrality of creation in Milton's verse. As

Michael Lieb points out: "Creation is so important to the action of *Paradise Lost*, [that] most scholars have had something to say about its presence in Milton's epic" (10 n.10). Lieb's own book-length engagement with Milton's epic is initiated by the insight that "the idea of creation in all its aspects" serves as the "common referent by which the oppositions of the poem find expression" (7). I maintain that it is no accident that creation occupies such a central position in Milton's poetry. More than a convenient trope or a compelling metaphor, creation is in many ways the bedrock of Miltonic thought. Milton's verse, like his theology, centers in creative acts because Milton's materialist monism compels him to define divinity in terms of creation. Creation is crucial—in both the poetry and the prose—for deity depends upon it.

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NOTES

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¹ All references to Milton's prose come from the *Complete Prose Works*.

² In *De Trinitate*, Augustine also invokes the categories of creature and creator in reference to God's sovereignty. Augustine's usage, however, differs significantly from Milton's. In Milton's theology, a subject's status as creator or creature has no substantial importance, for creator and creature alike share the same substance. In Augustine's outlook, however, a subject's creational condition has everything to do with substance. According to Augustine, there is a "substance of the creature" and a "substance of the Creator." It is these various substances that Augustine has in mind when using the terms

"creator" and "creature." In 1.6.9, for instance, Augustine uses the term "creature" to refer to "every substance which is not God." Later in the passage, it is clear that Augustine's claim that the Son is "not a creature" aims at nothing other than establishing that the Son does not possess the "substance of the creature" but rather the "substance of the Creator." The Son's status as "uncreated" is meaningful for Augustine because it indicates that the Son "is of the same substance with the Father" (1.6.9). In other words, the terms "creator" and "creature" are significant for Augustine only insofar as they express different substantial states. Even when he refers to acts of creation, Augustine continues to be concerned primarily with "the metaphysics of substance."

³ The precise nature of Milton's anti-Trinitarianism as well as its position in relation to early modern Anglican orthodoxy is, of course, a source of considerable contention. In *Bright Essence* William B. Hunter, C.A. Patrides, and J.H. Adamson argue that Milton's stance in regards to the Son is simply an innocuous form of "subordinationism" easily accommodated within orthodox models of the Godhead. In "Milton's Arianism: Why It Matters," however, John Rumrich contends that "subordinationism" is a term both meaningless and anachronistic to studies of Milton. Rumrich argues instead that Milton's theology aligns him with a heretical form of anti-Trinitarianism identified in Milton's time by the term "Arian." Michael Bauman's book-length study, *Milton's Arianism*, exhaustively and persuasively confirms Rumrich's claim. As the present essay suggests, I side with Bauman and Rumrich.

⁴ The disproportionate length of Chapter 5 is seen in the fact that each of the other 50 chapters averages only 14 manuscript pages in length.

⁵ Other backwards-reading theologians include, among others, St. Augustine. In his own *De Doctrina Christiana* (translated as *On Christian Teaching*), Augustine explains that sometimes scripture must be taken literally and sometimes it must be taken figuratively. In matters of literality or metaphoricality, Augustine urges an approach akin to Milton's approach in the case of creation. Augustine's interpretation, like Milton's, is guided by

certain pre-conceived ideas. He begins with the desired meaning and then interprets the text in such a way as to yield that desired meaning:

In dealing with figurative expressions we will observe a rule of this kind: the passage being read should be studied with careful consideration until its interpretation can be connected with the realm of love. If this point is made literally, then no kind of figurative expression need be considered. If the expression is a prescriptive one, and either forbids wickedness or wrongdoing, or enjoins self-interest or kindness, it is not figurative. But if it appears to enjoin wickedness or wrongdoing or to forbid self-interest or kindness, it is figurative. (3.54–55)

In short, Augustine also reads backwards. Instead of interpreting texts to arrive at an eventual meaning, Augustine openly allows an already-arrived-at meaning to shape his textual interpretation.

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